

Stretching the Boundaries Of Things Musicians Do

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4 minutes

POP REVIEW

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By the day of the concert, it had become commonplace to refer to Friday night's performance at the Knitting Factory of John Zorn's "Cobra," thick with favorites of the downtown improvised-music scene, as an "all-star" version of the piece. Such hype concealed the fact that "Cobra" uses musicians not for what they have done, but what they might do in a fresh setup; it creates its own all-stars, and sometimes relative unknowns create its best performances.

The most durable of Mr. Zorn's "game pieces," "Cobra" is not, on paper, a piece of music. The composer has called it "a series of on-off switches," and it asks a group of improvisers to follow rules and at the same time give instructions to one another. Mr. Zorn's presence isn't necessary, but on Friday he was the prompter for the piece, holding aloft signs telegraphing both his own desires and those of the musicians.

The players offer lines and stylistic mini-ideas; the prompter tells them to repeat, remember, pair up, imitate one another and so on. In one of the more prompter-directed pieces, Mr. Zorn held up a white sign reading "SX," which organized a growing cross-fade from pianissimo to deafening clamor; an entire off-the-cuff piece was built out of these swellings.

In another piece, the keyboardist Anthony Coleman put on a red headband and pointed to the disk jockey David Shea, who did the same. Mr. Shea and Mr. Coleman developed a spacey funk vamp, and then the drummer Susie Ibarra got the prompter's nod to improvise on it. The guitarist Chris Cochrane pointed to his nose, jabbed one finger in the air (indicating he wanted to play a duo), and gestured to the harpist Zeena Parkins. Mr. Zorn let the rest of the group know about this, and all fell quiet except for the duo.

The performance yielded some fertile combinations: the turntable artists D. J. Spooky and Otomo Yoshihide, deft and wild collagists of recorded sound; an Anthony Coleman-William Parker-Ikue Mori trio, radically updating the old-fashioned organ-bass-drums combo. But the most obvious strength of "Cobra" is a function of its composition, not its performance: the way it separates and identifies the quick-nerve power relationships going on in a hot, reactive band, like a transparent watch with all the works visible.

Mr. Zorn, of course, stood with his back to the audience, making the cue cards unreadable to the audience; listeners are given to judge it on how it sounds. It sounded funny, crashing, quiet, episodic, dense, fractured, and then with a shuddering stop it was over.

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